

'Ashes' by Cate Kennedy

		By the time they stop at a café for the obligatory morning tea, Chris is already feeling his staunch goodwill leaking away.	
		Enervating, to be in her presence like this.	
		Despite all his resolve to say pleasant and attentive, today of all days, something has nevertheless turned a tap on inside him and his energy is draining away.	
		Later, he'll feel the same guilt as ever, but right now, sitting with a coffee listening to his mother complaining about the fake whipped cream on her scones, he feels all that evaporating. Ten-thirty in the morning, and he's already itching with it.	
		He just has to keep his mood on the good side of surliness.	
		And surely even his mother would forgive him a touch of melancholia today, considering the occasion.	
		He sees her fastidiously scrape the cream off the scones, making sure the waitress is watching, and pile it distastefully on the side of her plate.	
		She's dressed up today, hair done, lipstick matching the red blazer.	
		Black shoes with heels.	
		He'd told her to dress in something easy to walk in, because he remembered there was some walking involved, but it was like talking to a brick wall.	
		She'd be able to stop now on the walk, grimace and suffer.	
		Talk about her blisters for week afterwards with her book club women.	
		He thinks of them in formidable capitals: the Book Club Women.	
		Women perennially sitting around modular lounge suites, criticising someone's book.	
		His mother keeps photos of the grandchildren of the Book Club Women on her own fridge, like a silently accusing rebuke every time he walks past.	
		'Dear little Justin started his swimming lessons last week,' she'll say, smiling out at something through the screen door.	
		'Sorry? I'm not sure I know who Justin is.'	
		She'll tut impatiently. 'Oh, of course you do, Christopher. Sandra's grandson.'	
		He'll be struggling to place Sandra while she continues on another tangent.	
		'Well Caroline's really in a tizz over this wedding. She wants Pam to go up there to help her, all the way to Brisbane. She'll have to change her tune pretty quick smart once she marries that James fellow. Can't be calling on her mother to be at her beck and call all the time.'	
		She'll hesitate, as if reluctant to betray something confided in her, although Chris has heard this postscript every time Caroline is mentioned. 'You know they had to get counselling when she was a teenager once. Ran right off the rails.'	
		Chris will nod, follow her gaze out through the glass door to the leaf-littered garden.	
		She's talking about hiring a gardener now, to deal with it.	
		His father's rakes and brooms stand stiffly to attention beside the locked shed.	

	No.
	Now that push has come to shove, it's going to be him.
	A handful of coarse sand is what it feels like.
	That's all.
	He pinches some of it between his fingers and lets it sift down into the water.
	He remembers that they had both crouched here with saucepans and cleaned them with river sand, then filled them to pour onto the grey ashy coals of the campfire, the day they'd broken camp to go home.
	His father had trodden the coals down, crushing them neatly, scattered some soil over the top just like Chris is scattering the contents of the box now over the water.
	Small handfuls.
	That smell of wet ash, and the cicadas beating like the ticking of a clock, and his father giving the site one last glance around and saying, 'Great soot anyway, don't you reckon, Chris?'
	Why hadn't he answered with enthusiastic assent?
	What would it have cost him to give his father that, instead of a shrug, just for the small mean pleasure of feeling his father turn away, defeated?
	He scoops up another handful and spills it into the water.
	A drift of grey and white particles swirls on the surface and disperses.
	He can't believe this is all that's left, this dust and grit, pounded down from something as hard and unyielding as bone.
	'Goodbye, Alan,' he hears his mother whisper, over and over, until the box is empty.
	The two of them stand there as she mechanically folds and refolds the calico bag, weeping, shifting in her uncomfortable shoes.
	Why hadn't he answered?
	He stoops and rinses his hands in the shallows, sick with the memory, the waste of it.
	The heat of the afternoon makes a chorus of cicadas gust up; still that throbbing tick like a heartbeat, measuring out the uncounted hours.
	'You okay to go?', he says finally.
	By the time they are back at the car, she's recovered herself sufficiently to wonder if they might get back to that gift shop before closing time, so she can buy those other frames.
	They can be gifts, she tells him, her animation returning with this new sense of purpose, for the ladies in the book club, to thank them for all the support they've given her.
	Chris thinks they can probably get back there by 4.30.
	As he nods and agrees what a nice gesture it would be, he sees a small smear of ash on the lapel of her jacket, and absently, tenderly, without interrupting her, he brushes it off.

	<p>Keeping it all together.</p>
	<p>They reach the jetty he remembers, and his mother makes a little exclamation of relief.</p>
	<p>'Oh, this is lovely', she says. Her voice is trembling. 'I don't want to say anything, Chris. I just want to do it. But it's so hard. I should have opened the box and saved some, to keep for myself.'</p>
	<p>He hurriedly feels in his pocket for some kind of container. 'We'll pop some ashes in the camera bag,' he says. 'Then you can take some home with you and scatter them under the roses, maybe.'</p>
	<p>He's desperate for a quick solution, to stop her dissolving into maudlin helplessness; he's the one with the resolve.</p>
	<p>'The camera bag,' he repeats with an indulgent chuckle. 'Imagine what he would have had to say about that!'</p>
	<p>He's rewarded with a wan smile. 'Better than a matchbox. Remember how he always hated me smoking, till I finally gave up?'</p>
	<p>Chris walks to the end of the jetty and extracts the box from the bag, crouching on the weathered boards to open it.</p>
	<p>Inside, there is a square polystyrene tub, securely sealed with tape. He picks at it.</p>
	<p>'Here,' says his mother, surprising him. She hands him a pair of nail scissors and he holds their sharp coolness in his hand for a moment pausing.</p>
	<p><i>In a minute, he thinks, stalling. Not just yet.</i></p>
	<p>'Lovely we've got the place to ourselves,' she murmurs. 'I'd hate there to be anyone else here. Lovely to have the privacy.'</p>
	<p>Chris glances up, out across the glittering water, wishing he'd worn his sunglasses.</p>
	<p>He has a sudden clear memory of his father, sitting in the dinghy, both their rods swinging without bait and the fishing forgotten.</p>
	<p>His father had sat squinting out at the glassy still surface of the water all around them, disconcertingly unfamiliar in his cotton sports shirt and towelling hat.</p>
	<p>'Don't reckon we'll catch anything, do you?' he'd said.</p>
	<p>Chris remembers shaking his head.</p>
	<p>'Not that it matters, though. Just good to be out here isn't it?'</p>
	<p>It's funny, he'd forgotten that moment until now.</p>
	<p>His father's hopeful smile.</p>
	<p>Chris rises and takes a photo of his mother standing on the end of the jetty in her red blazer.</p>
	<p>'Pick up the box,' he calls, peering into the viewfinder.</p>
	<p>She hesitates, then lifts it, holding it close against her chest, square and plain against her flowering scarf.</p>
	<p>Chris imagines her looking in the mirror that morning, trying the scarf on, lifting her chin in that way she has, every small decision an aching effort.</p>
	<p>He wishes he'd told her she looked nice, when he'd arrived at her door.</p>
	<p>Her expression as she faces the camera, obedient and tremulous and trying not to blink, makes his throat feel tight; there is a stinging behind his eyes.</p>
	<p>He takes the photo, then hurries back over to her and slices open the tape.</p>
	<p>He lifts the lid off and sees conflicting emotion on her face and she takes one panicked glance into the tub, her jaw clenching as she jerks her eyes away, over at the water again.</p>
	<p>'You,' is all she says.</p>
	<p>No possibility that Chris might be permitted to feel the same violent shirking resistance, no likelihood that he will just be able to stand and upend the box and shake its contents into the water without touching them.</p>

	<p>His mother sighs, looks out the window. 'He loved coming up here with you,' she repeats, half to herself.</p>	
	<p>It's nauseating, this revisionism; it infuriates him.</p>	
	<p>This, he thinks savagely, this is the best she can summon: the two of them travelling alone to enact a ceremony in the presence of no lifelong friends, no neighbours who care enough, no extended family, in a place whose symbolism is wholly an invention.</p>	
	<p><i>This is the reality</i>, he imagines saying to her, <i>just you and me, your 35-year-old son who you cast as the perennial bachelor, this pitiful pilgrimage I can't wait to be finished with.</i></p>	
	<p>The words rage in his head, smoking like acid in behind his clamped mouth.</p>	
	<p>He sees the sign to the lake come up over a crest, and the car's computer beeps at him again, like his father nudging him in the ribs, wordless and critical, as Chris snaps on the indicator.</p>	
	<p>Of late, his mother's started inviting him over to dinner during the week, and he's been realising with a sinking feeling that she's delaying serving the meal until later and later in the evening.</p>	
	<p>'Just stay and watch the news with me,' she'll say then, topping up his wine after they've washed the dishes, and Chris watches it, itching to be gone. 'You could always stay the night, if it's too late to drive home,' will be her next gambit, and he can't stand the studied casualness in her voice, the pretence of spontaneity. 'Your bed's all made up. You could just shower and go straight to work in the morning.'</p>	
	<p>'Mum, I've really got to go...'</p>	
	<p>'Grab a towel and there's plenty of clean shirts up there, just have a shower and drive to work straight from here,' she repeats, and behind the warmth in her tone he can hear the steely undercurrent <u>she'd used on him as a child to make him do as he was told</u>.</p>	
	<p>He knows where all these invitations are leading, and already feels exhausted with the thought of what hopes will have to be quashed before much longer.</p>	
	<p>Soon she won't camouflage her disappointment so well and then she'll raise the stakes.</p>	
	<p>'I don't understand why you can't just stay,' she'll say petulantly. 'I know you'll think I'm stupid but I feel nervous alone in the house at night.' She will pause, he is certain, and then add, 'And it's not as if you've got a wife and children at home waiting, is it?'</p>	
	<p>The whole campsite looks different – enlarged with signposted nature trails, composting toilets, designated fireplaces.</p>	
	<p>Chris thinks of gathering wood all those years ago, his father's lecture, as they walked, about snake and bushfires.</p>	
	<p>The way he'd taken a trowel he'd brought along specially and dug a shallow rectangular hole for their campfire, and laid the sticks out in a grid.</p>	
	<p>His mother puffs a little as she walks up the sandy track from the car park, and Chris consciously slows his walk down.</p>	
	<p>The thought that she might want him to say something, some kind of spoken farewell on the jetty, fills him with a queasy panic.</p>	
	<p>It was bad enough doing the eulogy at the funeral, then he'd amazed himself by breaking down afterwards, while he was talking to the minister at the reception.</p>	
	<p>The other man had stood patiently, holding a cup of tea, as Chris snuffled into a handkerchief, fighting to regain his composure.</p>	
	<p>How could he even begin to tell this stranger what he was really grieving for?</p>	
	<p>He'd taken a breath before realising he couldn't even articulate what it was himself.</p>	
	<p>Just the strain of the day, he thinks now.</p>	

	<p>Scott had waved his bitterness off, like it wasn't worth rising to the bait for. 'Well, yeah,' he'd said mildly. 'It is. No point blaming them. Move on. That's what I say.'</p>	
	<p>It was Scott who'd moved on, though.</p>	
	<p>Chris had been going to introduce him to his parents, he just had to wait for the right moment, he'd told Scott in increasing tones of self-recrimination.</p>	
	<p>It wasn't as if he was ashamed of him, God no.</p>	
	<p>But he'd gone anyway.</p>	
	<p>Chris thinks now of the last time he'd seen his father, in the hospital after the surgery.</p>	
	<p>It must have been the morphine that had removed the usual armour of avoidance.</p>	
	<p>'Your mother gone down to check out the gift shop, has she?' his father had muttered, the words slurring.</p>	
	<p>The corner of his mouth lifted in a small wry smile.</p>	
	<p>Chris swallowed and squeezed the arm lying slackly on the white sheets. 'She has, yes. Or down for a coffee.' He smiled back too hard.</p>	
	<p>'Your mother,' said his father. There was a pause like the frequency had gone off the airwaves momentarily, or he was sifting through a limited selection of words. 'Your mother's always been proud of you, Chris. In her own way.'</p>	
	<p>Chris's hand stayed on the arm, patting now.</p>	
	<p><i>Don't tell me it's going to be now</i>, he thought with disbelief.</p>	
	<p><i>Don't you dare do this now, when it's all too late.</i></p>	
	<p>His father licked his lips. 'You obviously... you've got to live the way you see fit.' He was whispering. Every word like a pulling stitch as he panted slightly, eyes shut tight against the possibility of looking his son in the eye. 'But there's no need to... well... throw it in her face. It would kill her.'</p>	
	<p>Spending his last hours worrying about her.</p>	
	<p>It has killed him, not her.</p>	
	<p>He'd taken that tiny admission, heavy and impervious as a lead sinker, and clung on to its icy weight all the way down to the depths.</p>	
	<p>A secretive man, Chris thinks now.</p>	
	<p>The irony is not lost on him that he has that insight because he has become one himself.</p>	
	<p>More than ever since the funeral, his mother has embellished past events to give them a patina of something richer and happier.</p>	
	<p>Every time he visits, it seems, they're embroidered more until the truth as he remembers it is buried under stiff layers of decorative restitching.</p>	
	<p>When his father was alive, she'd railed for years at his morose passivity, heaped bitterness and blame upon him for keeping her locked in a dull and predictable life.</p>	
	<p>Chris recalls the way she used to speak to him, like he was a slow-witted employee; eye-rolling, histrionic exasperation at the slightest mishap.</p>	
	<p>All that is gone now.</p>	
	<p>Instead, she reminisces with a sweet, sad smile about his patience, his bumbling good intentions.</p>	
	<p>'What a shame you never thought to take photos on those trips,' she says fretfully. 'Your father would have loved a record of them.'</p>	
	<p>Chris jumps again as the car beeps at him accusingly, and he shifts against the sheepskin seat-cover.</p>	

	<p>'I told them we'd just be going to the lake, just the family. It's better to do something that's meaningful to Chris and me, that Alan would have wanted, I said.'</p>	
	<p>She pauses.</p>	
	<p>Here it comes.</p>	
	<p>'Those trips to the lake with you were very special to your father, Chris.'</p>	
	<p>He grunts his assent.</p>	
	<p>He can't bring himself to answer, in case he gets some detail wrong.</p>	
	<p>'I told Shirley, that's where he'd rather be laid to rest, in the place where he shared such precious times with his son. He had lots of happy memories of all those fishing trips.'</p>	
	<p><i>All those fishing trips.</i></p>	
	<p>They'd been twice.</p>	
	<p>Once at the Easter break, and once for the first week of the September school holidays.</p>	
	<p>After that his father had given up.</p>	
	<p>Both trips are still etched vividly in Chris's mind, like so many of the powerless indignities of childhood.</p>	
	<p>His father's attempts at blokey conversation puttering out like the dinghy's outboard, signing as it gave up the ghost in a bank of weeds, Chris feeling sick with the stink of petrol, asked if he could take his book out on the boat with them the next day.</p>	
	<p>At night they'd sit in front of their tent, waiting for it to get dark, both of them without a thing to say beyond their usual wary exchanges.</p>	
	<p>His father's forced cheeriness slowly evaporating into his usual taciturnity as he got tired of trying.</p>	
	<p>Chris coughing in the acrid smoke.</p>	
	<p>Trying not to move too much in the stuffy sleeping bag at night.</p>	
	<p>Then the packing of the car on the last day, the esky empty and leaking with melted ice, and his obscure sense that he'd failed some test.</p>	
	<p>'I don't know what's bloody wrong with you,' his father had muttered as they drove back down this very road after the second trip.</p>	
	<p>Chris had wanted to say something, some retort that would salvage some pride, but his mouth had felt dry, scorched somehow.</p>	
	<p>He was eleven... no, twelve, and starting to get a glimmer that there was something deeply dissatisfying about him, something that baffled his father and pinned a strained, mortified smile on his mother's face when they had visitors.</p>	
	<p>Neither of them, not his father nor his mother, had any idea how to name what that thing was.</p>	
	<p>He'd just look up sometimes and catch it in their faces, something like fear.</p>	
	<p>It wasn't till uni that what was <i>wrong with him</i> had hit him square in the face at last, with a flash of realisation that was so clichéd it was almost comical.</p>	
	<p>He'd expected commiseration when he'd related the father-son trips to Scott one time, but Scott had collapsed with mirth instead.</p>	
	<p>'Jesus, that's priceless,' he'd said. 'What a hoot.'</p>	
	<p>'It wasn't a hoot, it was bloody excruciating. Like a punishment.'</p>	
	<p>'Lighten up. You're not the first gay man whose parents didn't understand him.'</p>	
	<p>'Don't tell me, it's all part of the journey,' Chris had said.</p>	

	He stands beside the car dangling the bag, waiting for her as she pauses by a craft shop and browses through things outside in a rustic barrow.
	Chris can see what's piled there – miniature teddies, lavender sachets, fabrics.
	She has a wardrobe full of unfinished craft projects at home, although, thank Christ, he suspects she's finally given up and stopped knitting baby clothes.
	Totally absorbed, she picks up a bag of bath salts and examines it with all the time in the world.
	'Your mother could shop in a service station,' his father used to say, poker-faced.
	He'd wait outside countless shops for her in an attitude just like Chris's now, leaning resignedly against the car.
	She'll want something to commemorate the trip, Chris knows, a souvenir she can store on a shelf and refer to bravely, and sure enough she gets back in the car with a paper bag.
	'Lovely silver frame,' she murrnurs. 'Half price. There were a few of them too. I wonder if I should have got one for Pam.' She sighs, comforted by her purchase, the slight of the fake cream forgotten.
	Chris is looking for the turn-off.
	He thinks he'll know it when he sees it, although he hasn't been up here for twenty-five years.
	Then another twenty kilometres or so to get to the lake.
	As far as he can remember there's a little jetty there, past the campsites – a good spot to stand and do it, rather than the muddy shore.
	He's got the camera all charged up.
	His father's car has some kind of cruise-control check that beeps at him every time he inadvertently goes above the set limit, and he keeps jumping when he hears it, feeling a ludicrous start of guilt.
	The late-morning heat in the car is making the familiar smell of his father even stronger.
	When was the last time he'd stood close enough to his father to inhale the real thing?
	Not at the hospital; nothing there but the smell of antiseptic and drugs.
	He punches a CD into the player and another little memory-bomb goes off in the back of his head – it's the Three Tenors, the CD he bought for his parents two Christmases ago.
	That would have been the last time: a fraternal, quick arm-squeeze and back-slap, both glad to have it over.
	There's a headache starting between his eyes.
	He can feel what's coming: his mother wants to talk, and he must pay attention to divert her in time from dangerous territory.
	'People said the service was so lovely and dignified,' she begins. 'Graham and Laura were asking me whether I was going to have a memorial plaque for your father at the crematorium gardens. Well, I went out with Neil and Shirley to have a look, because that's what Elaine did when John died, but Laura told me it cost her thousands. And they don't even inter the ashes, just scatter them. It's all just garden beds, you know; it's not as if there's even an actual plot.'
	Chris waits for the next bit, about the lake.
	He can't help it, this roiling, sneering intolerance.
	She's grieving, he knows; vulnerable, needing contact, prone to these banal litanies of repetition, but he just can't help it.
	He clenches his jaw.

	Since his father died, Chris keeps coming across small reminders everywhere, set like mousetraps ready to snap, like little buried landmines.	
	Today for instance, they're in his father's car, which his mother can't bear to sell.	
	It smells so characteristically, still, of shoe polish and peppermints, and in the back seat lies the woollen tartan scarf his father had worn for years.	
	Each detail had assailed Chris as he'd opened the door, reaching over to stow the box in its calico bag on the back seat.	
	'Here, here,' his mother had remonstrated. 'At my feet.'	
	<i>Where else?</i> he'd thought sourly, finding the right key for the ignition, as the lifetime habit of keeping his responses to himself closed his mouth in a firm and well-worn line.	
	A line that suggested nothing, broached nothing, gave nothing away.	
	'Five dollars for those scones,' his mother says as they walk out of the café. 'Honestly.'	
	The Book Club Women, Chris thinks, will hear about this.	
	Back at the car, as he waits for her to catch up, he fumbles for the self-locking device on the key ring, finding the one for the boot so he can take the bag out again.	
	His mother had insisted they park the car in view of the café so she could watch it for potential theft.	
	'It's bad enough leaving him there in the boot like that,' she'd said, digging in her bag for a tissue, 'without risking someone stealing him.'	
	'Take the bag with us, then,' he'd suggested.	
	She'd glared, aghast. 'I couldn't possibly.'	
	He's noticed she can hardly bring herself to touch the box.	
	It's like some huge supernatural power emanates from it.	
	When they'd gone to get it from the crematorium, she'd stood silent, locking her hands tightly together, leaving it to him to pick it up, sign for it, and ask for a carry bag.	
	It wasn't until they were outside that she'd burst out with a tirade about how disrespectful it was not to provide families with an urn, or something appropriate.	
	A box, she'd hissed all the way home, fuelled by the outrage of it, nothing but a box.	
	He'd expected tears, but there were none.	
	Instead, once home, she'd led the way to her antique cabinet, unlocked it, and stood back while he pushed the box inside, in there among the gold-leaf dinner service he remembered so well from his parents' dinner parties when he was a child.	
	As he'd straightened up after putting his father's ashes inside the cabinet, he longed so much to be with Scott that it almost hurt.	
	It hit him still sometimes when he least expected it, even after three years: moments when he missed him with an intensity almost like an electric shock; something searing that flashed and left a lingering ache.	
	Scott would have known exactly what to do – pour them both a whisky, probably, and then sit him on the verandah talking till they'd killed the bottle.	
	Chris wouldn't have been standing here now, either, feeling useless and tongue-tied, embarrassed by the floundering pause between his mother and himself, like two strangers observing someone else's ritual.	
	Scott would have known how to give the moment some ceremony.	